

FURBEARERS

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North Dakotans have traditionally enjoyed liberal seasons on the majority of the state's furbearers.

Some furbearers, like coyotes, foxes, beavers and badgers are managed year-round by the Department due to concerns of predation on waterfowl and upland game birds; and damage to trees, flooding, and predation on domestic livestock.

Abundant furbearer species provide opportunities for hunters and trappers, as well as a valuable fur resource during cold months. Furbearers also serve important roles in the ecosystem and are appreciated for their intrinsic value.

Furbearer population fluctuations in North Dakota are monitored annually through surveys and other biological information, and some notable changes have occurred since 1988. At the top of the list is the return of several native furbearers that were gone from the state for much of the last century.

In the late 1980s, furbearing species dependent on wetland habitats weren't faring well due to drought. Muskrat populations were especially hit hard in 1988, because of drastically reduced water levels in marshes. Muskrats recovered when the state experienced an unprecedented amount of precipitation in the early 1990s. Today, muskrat numbers over much of the state are again low because of dry conditions.

Other furbearers, like red foxes and coyotes, thrived during the late 1980s. Historically, foxes were more prevalent in the eastern part of the state, whereas coyotes were more dominant in the west. But low pelt prices for red foxes in the mid-1980s helped create a rise in fox numbers, and in 1988, some of the highest fox populations in the state were recorded.

At the same time, coyotes were continuing their eastward expansion, and questions were raised regarding the influence they would have on red fox distribution. Looking back, the effects are clear. Today, fox densities are at an all-time low in both eastern

and western North Dakota. For example, total red fox harvest in 2007 was 8,000-16,000 animals, compared to 20,000-30,000 in 1988. Coyotes now are prevalent statewide.

Bobcats have been harvested annually in North Dakota south and west of the Missouri River. While only 25 animals were taken in 1988, fur hunters and trappers enjoyed a record high harvest of 170 animals in 2007. The Department continues to monitor the bobcat population to maintain healthy numbers.

Mountain lions have made a comeback in North Dakota. While there were few sightings in the late 1980s, there is now a small lion population in the badlands in western North Dakota, and animals have been documented traveling through other parts of the state. The state's fourth limited season for mountain lions will be held this year. See the 2008-09 Furbearer Guide for new regulations to hunt mountain lions.

We are experiencing an exciting time in North Dakota with the return of rare furbearers that previously were gone from the state, including river otters, fishers and American martens. These uncommon furbearers are protected with closed seasons. Studies are currently underway to assess populations in the state. Pay attention to signs of river otters if you are trapping along drainages in eastern North Dakota. These aquatic furbearers have been documented along the Red River and several of its tributaries.

Fishers have also been detected in northeastern North Dakota, and American martens have been found in the Turtle Mountains.

There have also been reports of swift foxes returning to North Dakota. Also protected, swift foxes are tan, cat-sized animals associated with prairie habitats. Any incidentally captured furbearer for which the season is closed must immediately be released if alive, or reported and turned over to the Department.

While North Dakota continues to provide excellent trapping opportunities, the estimated numbers of trappers has declined since the late 1980s.

Abundant furbearer species, such as this badger, provide opportunities for North Dakota hunters and trappers.



CRAIG BIRKLE